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Providing Multiple Opportunities for PASS Leaders to Reflect Critically

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ABSTRACT

The opportunity for high-achieving university students to take on leadership roles in mentoring and peer learning contexts is perhaps underutilised. Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programs are an example where the role of the peer leader, who facilitates the study session, is crucial to the success of the program. The implementation of PASS programs is motivated by, not only a desire to address issues of transition and retention within universities, but also a desire to provide learning support for students studying targeted and difficult subjects with large student cohorts. This paper uses Brookfield's framework (1995) of critical reflection to consider multiple ways in which PASS programs can embed opportunities for PASS Leaders to reflect critically upon their practice.

PASS PEDAGOGY

The use of mentoring in higher education environments has been established as an effective learning strategy, with students gaining confidence in their own ability to practise within the discipline and taking control of their own learning (Ramsden, 1992). Peer Assisted Study Sessions (PASS) programs in Australia are an adaptation of the Supplemental Instruction (SI) model introduced in the United States of America at the University of Missouri in 1973 (Arendale, 1993). The foundation of PASS pedagogy is the implementation of small-group study sessions for first year students studying in selected units, who undertake self-directed learning facilitated by more capable peers, usually second or third year students. The PASS sessions focus on integrating course content (what to learn) with academic reasoning and study skills (how to learn). PASS Leaders participate in training that focuses on equipping them for the specifics of their role; for example, working with groups, avoiding re-teaching, re-directing questions, developing study skills, and planning activities (University of Wollongong, 2003).

PASS is underpinned by social constructivist learning theory and in particular collaborative peer learning as a means of preparing learners to become independent and actively involved in constructing knowledge for themselves and understanding how to use it (Arendale, 1993). A key aspect of the PASS model is that students' construction of knowledge and their learning is mediated by interactions with more competent peers who are at a level of understanding just beyond that of the students themselves (Vygotsky, 1978).

Although the role of PASS Leader is very clearly situated in skills of facilitation and not 'teaching' as traditionally conceived, there are many aspects of the Leader's role that are informed by current views on effective practice in learning and teaching. Conceptualisation of learning has shifted from a focus on remembering facts and

knowledge to a focus on seeking to understand and bring a critical awareness to learning. There are also many aspects of good teaching practice that strongly align with the role of a facilitator. "Questions are the facilitator's most important tool...[and] many of the questions that support participants' learning are asked by facilitators spontaneously in response to the group's conversation as it develops" (Allen and Blythe, 2004, p. 3).

Learning experiences that enable students to engage in 'deep,' as opposed to 'surface,' learning, are a challenging, yet important, goal for effective teaching and learning (Biggs, 2003). A deep approach to learning involves students not only engaging with a task to find meaning, but also approaching their learning in a holistic manner, to make connections between knowledge, skills, and learning activities (Ramsden, 1994). Founded upon constructivist theories of learning, such views emphasise the ways in which learners construct knowledge for themselves into an integrated and holistic understanding (Steffe and Gale, 1995). These principles align well with the aims of PASS, being to support students to develop habits of independent and deep learning.

PASS Leaders prepare for their sessions by: re-attending the lectures in the subject they are supporting; using their own experience of the subject; and considering the difficult content, concepts, and important study skills that are particularly relevant to the subject. They then plan activities for the group that might best enable students to work together to better understand the subject concepts and learn effective and transferable study techniques. Most importantly, PASS sessions are responsive to the particular learning needs of the students.

At all stages of their profession, teachers are required to reflect on the suitability of their teaching practice, knowledge, disposition, values, and relationships, and to adjust and adapt accordingly. Similarly, PASS Leaders who are able to develop a capacity to reflect critically upon their role and their sessions, and be responsive to their own reflections and others' feedback, will be well placed to continually learn and impact upon the successful learning outcomes of the students in their groups.

BROOKFIELD'S FRAMEWORK FOR CRITICAL REFLECTION

Brookfield (1990) advocates for teachers in higher education settings to have "critically responsive teaching" embody their practice. Critically responsive teaching is concerned with developing critical thinking in students, encouraging them to question assumptions and acquire a mind that is "sceptical of claims to final truths or ultimate solutions to problems, is open to alternatives, and acknowledges the contextuality of knowledge" (Brookfield, 1990, p. 21). It is also responsive; adapting teaching content and processes to the needs of students.

Brookfield (1995) goes much further in *Becoming a critically reflective teacher* and provides teachers with a framework within which they can situate their reflective practice. Brookfield's framework includes four lenses through which to view practice: our autobiographies as learners and teachers; our students' eyes; our colleagues' experiences; and theoretical literature. By reflecting upon practice through these different lenses, Brookfield argues that new perspectives are gained and the accuracy and validity of our assumptions can be tested as we work to create democratic learning environments.

Brookfield's (1995) four lenses can be summarised as:

Theoretical literature

Considering the educational theory and research that informs practice is an important

element in critical reflection. It provides a foundation for our beliefs and practices and can assist in considering and explaining the many learning and teaching experiences we have.

Our students' eyes

Gaining feedback, both informally and formally, from our students can reveal a lot about how our intentions are being received and how students are experiencing the learning environment. Anonymity for the student in this context is critical, to enable honest feedback to be sought.

Our colleagues' experiences

Participating in purposeful conversation with peers provides different perspectives on similar issues of interest, and alternative approaches to be considered. It also allows a sharing with those in a similar situation.

Our autobiographies as learners and teachers

This dimension of reflection includes reflecting upon our own experiences as both a learner and as a teacher. Considering our own learning experiences enables a connection to the experiences of our students. In the 'teaching' role, self-reflection can be the first step in becoming more critically aware of the assumptions and decisions we make when planning and enacting our practice.

CONTEXT: PASS AT THE UNIVERSITY OF TASMANIA

At the University of Tasmania (UTAS), the PASS program is managed centrally by the Centre for Advancement of Learning and Teaching (CALT). Having piloted the program in 2007, the University has committed to an extensive and strategic three-year roll-out of the PASS program to an estimated 35 units across all faculties by 2010. PASS at UTAS currently employs 32 PASS Leaders, who during Semester 1, 2008 supported 59 PASS sessions across 10 different subjects. A very encouraging 36% of students who had PASS available to them engaged with this voluntary learning program.

Early evaluations of the program have evidenced higher average results for the students who attended PASS as compared with non-PASS attendees. In addition, qualitative feedback from students indicate that they value PASS, not only for their improved learning of the subject content and academic study skills related to their discipline, but also for providing them with a strong sense of belonging to their discipline group and broader university. These outcomes align with national and international experiences of PASS/SI programs.

Support for the PASS Leaders is an important part of the UTAS PASS program. In addition to overall support from the PASS Program Coordinator, three more experienced PASS Leaders were this year employed in a senior role, as PASS Mentors. The key role of the PASS Mentors is to support a group of approximately ten PASS Leaders, not only administratively, but also in providing ongoing feedback and support with respect to planning and running PASS sessions.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR REFLECTION

By situating the support available to PASS Leaders at UTAS within Brookfield's four lenses model, the possibilities for critical reflection by the Leaders, together with areas for improvement within the program's support structure, are considered.

Theoretical literature

There are three key ways that the UTAS PASS program encourages PASS Leaders to engage with the educational literature that informs peer learning:

Training

The two day training course that Leaders complete before commencing their role at UTAS is that recommended by the Australian National PASS Centre at University of Wollongong. Importantly, the training focuses on the practical aspects of facilitating small groups and running PASS sessions. In addition, some time is spent providing an overview of the theoretical background of peer and collaborative learning. As the PASS Leaders are from various discipline areas, educational theory is initially an unfamiliar area. Providing the Leaders with a focused overview of relevant areas of the literature enables them to begin to develop their own philosophy of PASS Leadership and build upon this as they experience the many facets of being a peer leader.

Re-visiting training

During semester break, a one-day professional learning program is offered to Leaders at UTAS. This provides them with an opportunity to re-visit aspects of their training, having spent one semester in the role. The day incorporates time to reflect on sessions and activities that worked well, and those that didn't work so well, and consider reasons for this. Leaders are able to revisit their developing philosophy of supporting student learning in a supportive environment with their own peers, and the PASS Mentors and Program Coordinator.

National PASS Leader awards

This year, for the first time, PASS Leaders at UTAS have had the opportunity to be involved in the National PASS Forum, by applying for National PASS Leader awards. These Leaders have had the additional opportunity to engage with the theoretical literature and relate more specifically their practice to the theoretical literature when putting their applications together.

Students' eyes

Student experiences of the learning environment are perhaps the most crucial for PASS Leaders to receive feedback on. The Leaders are aiming to provide a context where students can work together to unravel and understand concepts and skills relevant to their subject of study. The planning and structuring of sessions is able to be changed to meet student needs, but always in the context of the Leaders having more experience in the subject itself and possible successful academic study tools that suit learning in that discipline. The UTAS PASS program provides Leaders with two main opportunities to receive and unpack student feedback:

Students in PASS Sessions

PASS sessions are by nature designed to be responsive to the needs of students. Specific time at the beginning of sessions is given to the students to share their learning needs or perhaps questions that may have arisen from the previous lectures. The PASS Leaders do their best to address these needs within the planned activities for the session, by adjusting the session agenda, or by future planning. As PASS Leaders are still students themselves and still close to their own first year experience, they are in an excellent position to understand and to be receptive to student feedback.

Sharing PASS Survey results

As part of the PASS model, students who attend PASS sessions are given the opportunity to complete surveys during the last few weeks of semester, providing feedback on their experiences of PASS. The UTAS PASS program employs PASS Leaders, interested in having some additional casual work, during the evaluation of semester results. PASS Leaders are involved in entering student survey data and provided with a framework for

coding and analysis of the data and preparation of evaluation reports. This gives those students an in-depth insight into the students' experiences of PASS.

In addition, detailed evaluation reports comprising three main components: attendance, student survey results, and academic outcome results, are shared with the Leaders during the follow-up professional learning day. This gives the Leaders an opportunity to reflect upon the outcomes of the PASS program with the other leaders in their subject area, and consider critically both the positive and negative feedback of the students and how that might inform their future PASS sessions.

In 2008, the UTAS PASS Leaders, together, identified two areas for focused improvement in their roles as a result of considering the student survey reports. These areas were time management and the development of unit-specific study tools for PASS sessions. This has informed the planning of the second semester fortnightly training meetings by the PASS Mentors.

Colleagues' experiences

Feedback from colleagues and opportunities to share with colleagues are provided to PASS Leaders at three levels: other PASS Leaders, the PASS Mentors, and the PASS Program Coordinator. It is the aim of the Program Coordinator to make every effort to establish a PASS program founded upon principles of support and a 'team' culture. Feedback from the Leaders themselves with respect to ways of improving the program and ways of enhancing support for their role is continually sought through email and face-to-face communication, meetings, and professional learning opportunities.

Meetings – incorporating reflection

The UTAS PASS program embeds various opportunities for PASS Leaders to meet and reflect upon their experiences. Leaders are encouraged to plan with the other Leaders in their discipline group, as this provides them with the capacity to consider new ideas, to collaborate in planning, and to support each other. In addition, the PASS Mentors schedule fortnightly meetings with their group of Leaders. These meetings incorporate purposeful training activities around planning and running sessions, consider marketing and attendance, and deal with administration.

PASS Leaders at UTAS are paid for one hour of planning each week, one hour to attend the lecture in the subject they are supporting, and one hour for meeting each week, an important aspect of valuing the Leaders' themselves and the important reflective opportunities that these meetings provide. This is in addition to the pay for the sessions they run.

Re-training and professional learning

At the mid-year professional learning day, the PASS Leaders shared their own experiences of sessions that had worked well and those that had not worked so well, using some guiding questions to focus their discussions. In doing this collaboratively, many initiatives arose that are now being seen in the Semester 2 session plans. Of particular note has been the number of Leaders working hard on planning for variety within their sessions, from week to week, rather than staying with the same activities. Another example is a group of Leaders working to provide appropriate material for students to take away from PASS sessions, such as a study organiser, or perhaps an interesting journal article.

Feedback from Mentors/Supervisor

PASS Leaders are formally evaluated throughout the semester, using the PASS observation record (University of Wollongong, 2006). An important part of the quality assurance process of the program, the observation feedback is designed to enable supportive feedback to Leaders, particularly during the early stages of their role, and give a framework to discuss areas that the Leaders are doing really well in, or may need

to work on. Examples of areas where feedback is given include: room arrangement; setting the agenda at the beginning of the session; referring students to lecture notes and textbooks; the Leader avoiding re-teaching; and time management.

The UTAS PASS Mentors have also been trained to do formal observations of the PASS Leaders to enable more regular observations and both written and more informal verbal feedback to PASS Leaders as the semester proceeds.

Conference attendance

As previously mentioned, the National PASS Forum, or other opportunity for PASS Leaders to meet and share with Leaders from other Universities is invaluable. It provides a broader context within which PASS Leaders can reflect upon their role and share practical strategies for running PASS sessions.

Autobiographies as learners and teachers

Often the first lens through which reflection occurs is that of self-reflection. Providing formal opportunities for PASS Leaders to self-reflect and self-assess enables Leaders to be aware of their reflections and to develop tools to assist them to reflect honestly and effectively.

Training - considering first year experience

During the two-day PASS Leader training, time is included during the first day for Leaders to reflect upon and share their own first year student experience. This enables the Leaders to see themselves as learners and sets a context for considering the first-year student in relation to the place of the PASS Leader and PASS sessions.

Self-assessment opportunity - session evaluation

In 2008, Leaders were asked to complete a self-evaluation of a PASS session using the PASS Leader observation form (University of Wollongong, 2006). This provided another opportunity for the Leaders to self-assess and consider their progress based upon previous feedback and Mentor and Supervisor evaluations that took place earlier in the semester. This work will be reported at a later date, but early analysis indicates that the Leaders, although not having experienced many other educational settings where self-assessment was required, were able to examine their practice and describe areas that they wanted to work on to enhance student engagement in their PASS sessions.

Professional Learning opportunities

Active participation in professional learning opportunities such as meetings, training days, and conference participation, such as the University's annual teaching and learning conference, provide PASS Leaders with further avenues for focused self-reflection.

CONCLUSION

This paper has sought to provide a theoretical framework within which PASS programs can situate the opportunities that are provided to PASS Leaders for critical reflection. Although the PASS program at UTAS is in its early stages, it is growing significantly and the importance of quality assurance and support structures cannot be underestimated. Establishing multiple opportunities for PASS Leaders to reflect is seen as crucial to maintaining a successful and high quality program. It is hoped that these opportunities, combined, might enable Leaders to move to a more critical reflective approach as advocated by Brookfield (1995). Early indications suggest that embedding opportunities for critical reflection within the PASS program at UTAS is impacting upon the confidence of the PASS Leaders and the quality of the PASS sessions.

PASS Leaders are not, and nor should they be, trained teachers. Reflective practice is equally as relevant to the PASS Leaders, as study group facilitators, as it is for teachers.

Whilst further along in their own course of study, the Leaders are still students themselves. In many ways this puts them in a unique position of being able to look at the learning needs of students without pre-conceptions and to therefore bring a fresh approach to supporting student learning. Building in reflective opportunities maximises the opportunity for these Leaders to inform a continually improving program of academic support.

The use of Brookfield's (1995) framework, as suggested here, presents a theoretical model for situating the opportunities for critical reflection that exist within PASS programs. This model may also be applicable to other peer learning programs, and indeed other professions. Future research focused upon describing the critical reflection of the PASS Leaders and Mentors, and the depth and outcomes of their reflective practice will be important in terms of evaluating the effectiveness of the model.

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